

“The Word of God”
Hebrews 4:12-13
09.12.21

Introduction

In his book, *Half Truths*, Pastor Adam Hamilton talks about an unusual controversy that was taking place in the American Church at the end of the 19th century. Believe it or not, churches were having debates about whether it was unbiblical to have indoor plumbing.

Until the 1880's, indoor plumbing was a luxury rather than the norm. Most public buildings were following the trend and soon churches were faced with the choice of whether they would have bathrooms in the same vicinity where they worshipped.

The text that gave some Christians concern was Deuteronomy 23:12-14. It says,

The latrines must be outside the camp. You will use them there, outside the camp.

Carry a shovel with the rest of your gear; once you have relieved yourself, use it to dig a hole, then refill it, covering your excrement. Do these things because the LORD your God travels with you, right in the middle of your camp, ready to save you and to hand your enemies over to you. For this reason your camp must be holy. The LORD must not see anything indecent among you, or he will turn away from you.¹

For some, it was clear that the passage was being taken out of its historical context in an attempt to apply it to a situation where it did not fit. However, others responded with the popular phrase, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

I've heard this expression more than once. I've even seen it on bumper stickers. Another similar response in debates among Christians is, “This is what the Bible says, and the Bible is the Word of God.”

Over the years I have come to describe these kind of statements as “blanket arguments.” Blanket arguments are designed to control other people and shut down uncomfortable conversations. They are code for: stop talking; stop thinking; stop asking questions. Just comply.

When we read the stories of Jesus, however, we never hear him using blanket arguments. Interestingly, Jesus' opponents often use these cheap tactics to try to trap him, but Jesus always responds with incredibly generous, creative, and unconventional interpretations of Scripture. Instead of shutting down conversations, Jesus invites his conversation partners to expand on their limited understanding of God, life, and their relationships with others.

¹ Common English Bible

When the Pharisees are frustrated by the fact that Jesus breaks the Sabbath, he says, “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27 CEB).

When a lawyer asks Jesus what is necessary to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks, “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26 NIV)

When the Pharisees tell Jesus that the Law commands for an adulteress to be executed, Jesus responds, “Those without sin can cast the first stone” (John 8:7).

When the Sadducees try to trick Jesus because they don’t believe in the afterlife, Jesus responds, “You err in that you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God...Have you not read what was said to you by God, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Mark 12:27).

The Sadducees come at Jesus with a blanket argument.

“The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

“This is what the Bible says, and the Bible is the Word of God.”

But by proof-texting (i.e., finding a verse that supports their agenda) they are literally sucking the life and power out of the message of Scripture. They want to prove that there is no hope. Think about how distorted their thinking is that they are motivated to prove that death, rather than life, prevails.

This story speaks volumes to me. It makes me think of how often the Bible is used as a weapon to take life rather than to give it. And this approach is often followed by, “This is what the Bible says, and the Bible is the Word of God.” Almost as if to say, “Don’t shoot me, I’m just the messenger.”

With all of this in mind today, I want to ask the question, “What does it mean when we say that the Bible is the ‘Word of God’?”

Digging Deeper

When we turn to the Old Testament, we often see the phrase, “The word of the Lord” or “The word of God came to...” and a particular prophet is named. For instance, “the word of the Lord came to Jonah,” or “the word of the Lord came to Amos.”² It is a fresh word for a particular moment and a particular people. A divine revelation about what God is getting ready to do in the world.

No wonder the writer of Hebrews says, “The word of God is *alive* and *active*.” Another way of saying it is that the word of God is dynamic, not static. It is here. It is happening.

Do you hear it?

² 1 Samuel 15:24; 2 Samuel 12:9; 1 Kings 12:24; 2 Kings 9:36; 1 Chronicles 10:13; 2 Chronicles 11:2; Amos 5:1; Micah 1:1; Joel 1:1; Haggai 2:20; Zechariah 1:7; Isaiah 1:10, 28:4; Jeremiah 1:4.

Do you sense it?

Do you feel it?

Can you see it?

It is all around you.

In another place the writer of Hebrews says, “The worlds were framed by the word of God” (Hebrews 11:3). The word of God is God’s activity in the world and Holy Scripture is the way that the people of God relive it, retell it, and experience it anew, over and over again.

For ancient Jews, the word of God was so much more than words on a page. The word of God was divine wisdom—a living entity that was with God in the beginning—creating, acting, and bringing life into the world. We see wisdom being personified all throughout the wisdom literature in the Old Testament and in the intertestamental writings.³

So, it would have made perfect sense to the earliest Christians, who also happened to be Jewish, when the writer of the Fourth Gospel opens his story about Jesus saying, “In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him...” A few verses later, he writes, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

For centuries, this is what Christians meant when they used the expression, “Word of God.” It wasn’t until the 16th century when Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, began to apply this phrase to Scripture. However, he wasn’t relegating the “Word of God” to words on a page; instead, he was speaking of the Christ that we encounter through the message of Scripture.⁴

This is why when we read Scripture in worship, we respond with “This is the Word of God for the people of God.”⁵ We aren’t limiting it to the words on a page. The Word of God is something that is happening. Something, or more precisely, *Someone* we encounter.

Making a clear distinction between the two, Luther said, “The Bible is not the Christ. The Bible is the cradle wherein the Christ is laid.”⁶ This reminds me of something Jesus once said to the religious leaders when they think Scripture is the end in itself rather than a means to an end. He says, “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf” (John 5:39 NRSV).

³ Proverbs 8:22; Sirach 24:3.

⁴ According to one scholar, Luther indicated that the phrase, “Word of God” could be used in six different ways (Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, p. 243).

⁵ “Word of God” is used in the New Testament to describe apostolic preaching more than anything else (Johnson, *Hebrews*, p. 132).

⁶ Source unknown.

This verse leads me to believe that we can quote Scripture all day and study the Bible until we are experts, but when our motivation is to shut down a conversation rather than listen to someone else's story, or when we use it as a tool to control and suck all the life and power of its message, we completely miss the Word of God.

The Bible takes us to the Word of God. The Bible contains the word of God, reveals the word of God, and becomes the word of God. But as much as we like something in fixed form that is forever and universally binding, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that that is not how it works. The word of God is *alive* and *active*.

I love what it says next. "The word of God is sharper than a double-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12 NRSV). Now, if you're like me, you might cringe at first thinking about the word of God being like a sword—after all, we just talked about how sometimes people use Scripture as a weapon to promote death rather than life. But listen to the rest of the verse.

The writer does not say the word of God "is a sword." He says it is sharper than a double-edged sword. It is a simple comparison. He goes on to say that the word of God is "sharp enough to divide the soul from the spirit."

Obviously, this is hyperbole since the soul and the spirit are essentially the same. Then he says that it is "able to separate joints from marrow." The writer is not describing a weapon, he is using this imagery to describe a surgical tool that a skilled physician would use with great precision and care. The word of God is not a weapon that slays, it is an instrument that heals us and transforms our lives.

We encounter this powerful Word primarily through the person of Jesus Christ, who is mediated to us through Scripture. In the theological task of our *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, it says,

United Methodists share with other Christians the conviction that Scripture is the primary source and criterion for Christian doctrine. Through Scripture the living Christ meets us in the experience of redeeming grace. We are convinced that Jesus Christ is the living Word of God in our midst whom we trust in life and death. The biblical authors, illumined by the Holy Spirit, bear witness that in Christ the world is reconciled to God. The Bible bears authentic testimony to God's self-disclosure in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as well as in God's work of creation, in the pilgrimage of Israel, and in the Holy Spirit's ongoing activity in human history.⁷

It goes on to say, "As we open our minds and hearts to the Word of God through the words of human beings inspired by the Holy Spirit, faith is born and nourished, our

⁷ 2012 *United Methodist Book of Discipline*, pp. 81-82

understanding is deepened, and the possibilities for transforming the world become apparent to us.”⁸

Conclusion and Invitation

It is easy to take one of two approaches when it comes to the Bible. The first is to use it as a weapon: “The Bible says it; I believe it; that settles it.”

The second is to throw the baby out with the bath water. We can look at all of the passages that trouble us and point to the ways that Christians have used the Bible to do harm over the years. It has been used to justify slavery and warfare, and it has been used as a way to oppress women and other minorities.

But I think there is a third option that is a better way, and that is to see the Bible as an instrument of healing that mediates the word of God to us and helps us encounter the living Christ. It is this approach that has allowed the Church to boldly proclaim the evils of slavery, and other abuses of power.

The third way does not see Scripture primarily as a source that provides data and facts, but as a source of truth that operates on a deeper level and has the power to transform our lives and our communities. In the words of John Wesley, Scripture “contains everything that is necessary for salvation.”

I hope you will commit to a regular discipline of reading Scripture. If it scares you or intimidates you by its size or your lack of knowledge, know that the most important thing is that the Word of God in Jesus Christ is there to guide you, in and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, to speak to you today regardless of what challenges or circumstances you are facing.

Reference Tools

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⁸ Ibid., P. 82

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What is your favorite season of the year? Why? What is your *least* favorite season of the year? Why?
2. What is your favorite story, passage, or verse in the Bible? How does God's word speak to you through it?
3. As you reflect on the teaching in this chapter, what one thought stands out as being particularly helpful, insightful, or difficult to grasp?
4. If someone were to ask you, "What is the Word of God?" How would you explain it based upon your understanding?
5. How can we pray for you?
6. How have you experienced God lately?